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New Models and Old Theories

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It was nineteen twenty three when Freud published his second major theory about the mind, the structural theory, a tripartite model that divided the mind into Ego, Id and Superego. During the same decade many leading quantum physicists were publishing some of their bewildering findings. Concurrently the great mathematician/ philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, began integrating some of these findings into his process philosophy. For psychoanalysis, however, Newtonian physics – the accepted model of the time – became normative. Its major tenets, i.e., a strict separation between the observer and the observed (avoiding subjective influence), the replication of findings by other neutral observers and the

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reliance on strict cause and effect were paramount. Psychoanalysis assumed such models were normative despite its experience of what Freud named the unconscious – an area of psychic experience that shows remarkable parallels with some of the basic findings of quantum mechanics.

For far too many years most psychoanalytic theorists, while developing their science, avoided objective studies and, consequently, avoided establishing the value of sustained talk therapy in resolving psychological conflicts. Of late, however, there have been many studies that have validated sustained insight talk therapy – admittedly a talk therapy that is more interactive than the classical psychoanalytic approach. Additionally, current neuropsychological research is augmenting many psychoanalytic assumptions; many psychoanalytic training centers have established neuropsychological study programs. The only danger with this latest development is the apparent “scientific” assumption of equating the mind with the brain. Such an assumption seems to find some grounding within a Newtonian framework. Ultimately, the danger in exclusively using Newtonian paradigms is in its simplifying the complexity of consciousness and its foundational role – according to many quantum physicists – in understanding the micro world and consequently the macro world in which we live.

Relational psychoanalysis has recently come to the fore in its approach to clinical practice; with an appreciation of quantum mechanics models, however, such an approach has a scientific dimension that is not available using Newtonian models. Quantum mechanics models support an understanding of the impossibility of separating the “I” from the world, the crucial import of the observer on what is observed, the acceptance of probability over predictability and a radical rethinking of cause and effect. With such models, we have the opportunity to bring a scientific appreciation to the complexity of mind, the reality of subjectivity and the enigma of consciousness.